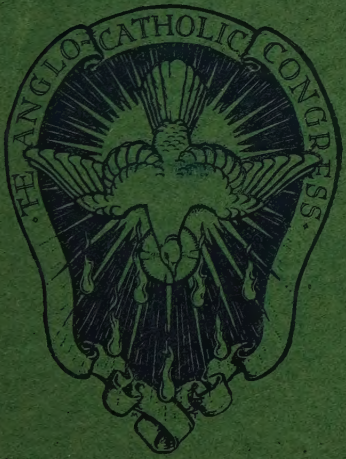
THE CONGRESS BOOKS : No. 43

VOCAL PRAYER



By G. W. HOCKLEY
RECTOR OF LIVERPOOL

THE CONGRESS BOOKS

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Rector of Liverpool

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Vocal Prayer

I THINK I may take it for granted that you who take the trouble to read these pages are in the habit of saying your prayers; but possibly you find prayer difficult, disappointing, at times even distasteful. You have been accustomed to pray since your earliest childhood; you do not dare, you do not desire, to give up your prayers—but you are often dissatisfied with them. If so, these pages are written for such as you, by one who is conscious of the same deficiencies.

And first let us try to understand what prayer is. Prayer is of course not merely asking God for what we want. That is a very poor and selfish view. It is much more than that. Let us see what some writers on the spiritual life give as definitions of prayer. Thus Fr. Baker says: 'Prayer is an elevation of the mind to God, expressing an entire dependence on him;' Dr. Liddon: 'Prayer is the act by which man puts himself into real and effective communication with the almighty, the eternal, the self-existent God;' Père Grou: 'It is the heart that prays: the

voice of the heart is love ; love God and your heart will always be praying to him ; ' and Dr. R. C. Moberly : ' Prayer is practising to think and to will and to speak face to face with God.'

We may say, then, that prayer is the lifting up of the mind and heart and will to God ; and may be described as communion with God, conversation with God, and correspondence with God.

(*a*) I say first, communion with God ; for indeed though we are thinking of vocal prayer, that is, of prayer put into words, yet such prayer must be the outcome of an attitude, a habit, a condition of our soul, which is best described in our Lord's words as ' abiding in him.' It is the state of one who knows his dependence upon God, and tries more and more to realize God's continual presence. Prayer is the deliberate consciousness of this presence within us, and the expression of that communion with God. The old peasant of whom the Curé d'Ars tells us knew this secret : ' I look at Jesus, and Jesus looks at me.'

(*b*) It is more than this silent contemplation : it is conversation. We sometimes say that prayer is speaking to God ; and so it is. But intercourse between two persons cannot be one-sided : it means listening as well as speaking ; and one very real part of prayer is listening to the voice of God. It is a dialogue between him and my soul—and our prayers

often suffer because we do not give sufficient opportunity for pauses and silences.

(*c*) It is correspondence with God. My will must have its part. And this is central to the true meaning of prayer. Prayer is a real co-operation between man and his Maker. It is the placing of my weak and wayward will alongside the holy and all-wise will of God. It is to acknowledge that the highest desire I can have is the fulfilment of the divine will. 'Thy will be done' comes at the heart of the Lord's Prayer: and whether expressed or implicit, it must be at the heart of every true prayer.

IF prayer is what we have seen it to be, it is a great privilege and ought to be a great happiness. But it is also a clear duty.

Prayer is a natural instinct. It is as necessary to the life of the spirit, as breathing is to the life of the body. The vitality of the spirit depends on the presence of God as that of the body does on the atmosphere. If the lungs ceased to perform their function, we should die; if we omit prayer, the spiritual life will languish and decay. So we find prayer a universal habit, natural to all men. In all ages, and amongst all races, there is found the consciousness of God, and

some practice of communion with him, however ignorant or grotesque may be the forms it takes.

And for a Christian, prayer is part of his obedience to the teaching of his Master. We have his clear command. He taught us that 'men ought always to pray, and not to faint.' He gave us the Lord's Prayer, the perfect instrument of private devotion, as the Holy Communion is the perfect instrument of public approach to God. He emphasized the need of persistent prayer in the parable of the importunate widow. At special moments he bade his disciples to pray.

Besides this, we have the force of his own example. He prayed at his Baptism and in the wilderness. He prayed before he chose his apostles; on the Mount of Transfiguration; in Gethsemane; on the cross. He went out upon the hill-side in the night-time to pray. And added to all this we have his rich promises to earnest prayer: 'Ask and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.'

Certainly there is a strange contradiction between the estimate of the ordinary man as to the place and value of prayer in our lives, and that which our Lord gave to it. If we neglect prayer we are stunting and starving the highest part of our life; we are depriving ourselves of the privilege of being 'workers together with God;' we are failing

to develop the growth of our friendship with him 'whose delights are with the sons of men.'

WE sometimes get tired of 'continuing instant in prayer.' We complain that our prayers are of no use—and bring no answers. 'Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss.' For if prayer is to be fruitful we must pray aright. There are certain conditions of good prayer which we need to bear in mind.

(*a*) We must have true ideas of God. We must think about him, and think rightly about him.

It is strange to reflect how ignorant and distorted and unworthy are many of the popular conceptions of God. We shall not know what prayer is, if we think of God as a mighty sovereign, far removed from our concerns, in the glory of some infinitely distant heaven; or, on the other hand, merely as the indwelling spirit of the universe, co-extensive with it and limited by it. In the one case prayer would be hopeless; in the other, useless.

Nor shall we pray well, if God is to us a stern despot, ready to pounce on us in anger; 'a fantastic monster perpetually spying, per-

petually listening, perpetually waiting to condemn.' No; we must have Christ's idea of God, if we are to pray aright. We must know him as our Father, loving, just, holy, who cares for all of us, and equally for each; to whom our needs and weaknesses are known, who is inexhaustible love, perfect justice, and infinite power.

(*b*) Our prayers must be in Christ's name. 'Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full' (*St. John* xvi. 23, 24). This of course does not mean just adding the familiar words 'through Jesus Christ our Lord,' to any petition that we offer. It would be foolish to think that that is sufficient to make a wrong prayer right. To pray in Christ's name means to pray in accordance with his mind and will, to ask such things as he can approve and recommend.

How many of our prayers are in our own name, rather than in the name of Christ? There is some object we greatly desire, some anxiety troubles us, some calamity threatens us, and we fall on our knees entreating God to grant our wish; and if the answer is not bestowed we lose our trust in God. But if our prayer was selfish, and we had little thought or wish for what was God's will, have we reason to expect our petition to be granted?

So there are two other utterances of Christ

about prayer to be remembered : ' If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you ' (*St. John* xv. 7). This is the means by which we may be sure that our prayer will be in Christ's name : if we are living in real moral and spiritual correspondence with him. And then, ' All things whatsoever ye pray and ask for, believe that ye have received them, and ye shall have them ' (*St. Mark* xi. 24).

We shall pray with humility, conscious of our ignorance as well as of our unworthiness ; submitting our petitions to God's wisdom, and finding the open road to the Father's heart through the merits of Christ. So we may pray with confidence, for we are coming to one who is ' wont to give more than either we desire or deserve.' And with humility and confidence, there will be perseverance : for earnest importunate prayer is the expression of our sonship in Christ and our training in fellowship with our heavenly Father.

THE common objections to prayer may be expressed in the form of three questions : Is it *reasonable ?* Is it *legitimate ?* Is it *necessary ?*

(*a*) *Is prayer reasonable ?* Does God care ? Can we genuinely suppose that the infinite almighty God takes an interest in the

details of my individual life? The thought of the immensity of the universe, of which I form but an insignificant atom, of the innumerable multitude of creatures of which I am but a single unit, may easily paralyse my confidence in the individual providence of God. But when we face this difficulty, we see that it is one, not of the reason, but of the imagination: we are unable to form a mental picture of an infinite personality. But if we do not judge value by mere measures of magnitude, and if the highest conception we can form of God is that of a Father, then the difficulty really disappears. Our Lord has taught us plainly that nothing is too small for God's loving regard. If he feeds the birds, and clothes the flowers, much more will he care for us his children.

(*b*) Or, it is asked: *Is prayer legitimate?* Is it right? The discoveries of scientific research have revealed to us the fact that the universe is under the dominion of the reign of law. And man, it is argued, can have no right—as he can have no reasonable hope—to disturb or alter the operations of that law. But prayer, intelligent and true prayer, is precisely not a repudiation, but a recognition, of divine law. It is the endeavour not to change or contradict the laws of God, but to co-operate with them, and thereby make them effective for ourselves.

Francis Bacon taught us that to control

nature we must learn to obey her. And that principle applies to the spiritual world as well as to the physical. Prayer is the spiritual activity by which I unite my human will with the will of God, and by so doing release those blessings which wait upon this co-operation before they can be made mine. My ignorance and selfishness may often impair this, and hinder the blessing: as may be the case with regard to material and intellectual achievements. But 'there are multitudes of things which God means for us and for the world that will never be ours unless we work for them; and quite as truly there are multitudes of things which God means for us, and through us for our brethren, which will never be ours or theirs unless we pray for them.' 'Thy will be done' is not a mere expression of passive submission, but of active and positive correspondence: and of no persons is it more true to say that they are 'workers together with God' than of those who have learned rightly to pray.

(*c*) Once more, it is objected: Granted that prayer may be defended as reasonable, and legitimate, yet *is it necessary?* God knows what we need, and God is good. He must therefore be both willing and able to give us all that we can rightly desire, without requiring us to ask him for it. But what an unworthy conception is here revealed of the nature of prayer; how mercenary the motive; how

frankly utilitarian the aim. This is indeed a travesty of prayer. Prayer is not an endeavour to tell God what he does not know; to offer him information as to our condition and necessities, of which otherwise he might not be aware. No: it is certainly true that our 'heavenly Father knoweth what things we have need of before we ask him.'

Nor again, and much less, is it an attempt to persuade God to be indulgent: to grant us what we greatly desire, but what we fear God may not intend to give; in the hope that by importunity and insistence we may exhaust his resistance. We have only to put the matter in that form to feel certain that, were the thing possible, we should neither dare nor desire so to act.

But prayer is something very different from this. It is the method by which we train ourselves in friendship and intimacy with our heavenly Father and Friend. We were created for fellowship, for companionship, with God. We are not to be like horse and mule, controlled by bit and bridle: he will guide us with his eye. We are to be more than servants, for he would call us friends. And the training in companionship, in mutual intercourse, in growing freedom of approach between spirit and Spirit, is to be found in nothing so much as in the constant habit of prayer.

THE practical difficulties we find in our prayers are probably more serious to us than these intellectual difficulties. We need not expect it to be easy to pray. 'The corruptible body presseth down the soul.' The world about us, the people we meet, the things we see, the work we do, visible, tangible, material, make the thought of the unseen spiritual world difficult. And yet we must learn to realize that world before we can rightly pray. Perhaps we may guard against some of our commonest difficulties, if we remember that our prayers must be regular, reverent, and real.

(*a*) *Regular.* We must have some rule about our prayers. It is only too easy to find excuses for omitting religious duties. We are tired in the evening, or late in the morning; or we do not feel in the right spirit for devotion, or we are too busy to find time. It is just here that our rule helps us, and protects us against ourselves. We must not let our devotions be at the mercy of moods and feelings, circumstances and interruptions.

Of course the rule will vary widely with different persons; and it should be made wisely. Also, no rule can be without exceptions when real necessity requires. Probably every one of us can make sure of some moments for prayer, at the beginning, middle, and end of the day. That should be the minimum.

And the amount of time we can give will depend upon our circumstances. We must remember, too, that many find it useful—if they know by experience that they are too tired to pray well when they go to bed—to say some quite short prayer then, and use an earlier time in the evening for the remainder of their night prayers. In the same way, it may sometimes be best to say little more than the Lord's Prayer on rising, and finish our morning prayers in a quiet interval after breakfast.

But prayer will not be confined to fixed times. Short ejaculatory prayers at any moment are very valuable: before a difficult interview; when assailed by evil thoughts, or faced with perplexity; and equally as expressions of joy or praise. Many find it useful to pray as they walk, or travel by tram or train; or to use a short interval of leisure in the quiet of an open church.

(*b*) *Reverent.* To acquire good habits of prayer is of real importance. But to pray well means more than that. We all know the difficulty of reverent attention, of realizing the presence of God. Perhaps we shall never completely overcome the hindrance of distracted and wandering thoughts. But we may do something to correct them. We can try to secure a quiet place, a quiet mind, and a quiet time. The writer of the Apocalypse seems exactly to describe these conditions,

when he tells us that he 'was in the isle that is called Patmos . . . in the Spirit, on the Lord's day.' We may find these circumstances in our own room, or in the silence of the church, or out of doors. But in any case we must do our best to secure that we shall be free from outward interruptions, and to clear our minds of thoughts that bring worry and anxiety.

We think of our Lord in Gethsemane, and we seem to see there the perfect conditions of reverent prayer. He is in a peaceful place, which he was accustomed to use for retirement. He is alone. He is fortified, indeed, by the near companionship of his friends, but in his actual prayer he is in solitude, and in a bodily attitude of reverent devotion. A posture of outward reverence not only enlists the body in our act of devotion, but disposes the soul to recollectedness. We know the value of the closed eyes, the bowed head, the bended knee, the holy sign upon the breast, the folded hands.

And he is engaged in hard work. He is bringing his need before the Father with concentrated intention: he is in an agony: for prayer demands the best energy of all our faculties; mind and heart and will are each engaged, and need to be fresh and vigorous.

(*c*) *Real.* The danger of unreality lies in our prayers being either in themselves inappropriate, or in intention insincere, or by familiarity formal.

Many of us have gone on using prayers we learned in childhood, and have scarcely altered or developed them as the years have passed. It is obvious that the prayers fitting for a child are not sufficient for mature age. 'When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.' Here arises the question of using printed forms of prayer: they are probably useful for many of us; but we should not feel tied to them, and should add to them and alter them at discretion. Our Lord warns us against 'vain repetitions'; that does not mean that all repetitions are vain or wrong; our Lord himself repeated his petition in Gethsemane. But we need to see that we do not let familiar words become mechanical and unmeaning; or think that the value of our prayers depends upon their length.

Our heart and will must be behind the prayers we offer to God. If prayer is co-operation with God, then it must be the expression of our true purpose and desire. For instance, though I should certainly pray for one who has done me an injury, I may fear that such a prayer is unreal, because bitter feelings towards him still torment my mind; but if in my innermost heart I wish the best for him who has injured me, and sincerely desire to be in charity towards him, then my prayer is real and right. Again, if

my prayer 'Lead us not into temptation' is to be real, I must endeavour to avoid known occasions of sin. Or, if I confess some fault to God, I must not resent or deny it, if I am charged with it.

Distractions and wandering thoughts are a continual difficulty to all of us. As long as they are not due to wilful carelessness and inattention, we must not be discouraged by them. Concentration in any occupation comes more easily to some than to others: and we can try to acquire it by renewed effort. Sometimes evil imaginations will present themselves at the most sacred moments: but if we have not invited or welcomed them, we simply brush them off us, as we should an insect that has settled on our hand, and disregard them. We must be patient with such infirmities, and be sure that God accepts our prayer, if we do our best.

THE natural attitude of prayer is either kneeling or standing, though we may pray in any attitude, if circumstances make it necessary. When we come to pray then, we kneel down and close our eyes, make the sign of the cross with the invocation, and then pause in silence for a moment to recollect

the presence of God and what it is we are about to do. We recollect that we are not alone in our prayer; that it is part of the unceasing stream of worship and intercession that goes up to the Father from the glorified humanity of our Lord, and from the whole company of heaven. So we call upon the assistance of the Saints and the Holy Angels; and place our confidence in the all-prevailing merits of our Redeemer. Our prayers should include five parts—

Adoration: some simple act of praise to God for what he is.

Thanksgiving: both for God's continual mercies, temporal and spiritual; and for any special blessings which we have received. Most of us need to make more of this part of our prayers than is often the case.

Confession: acknowledgment of sin and prayer for forgiveness; which should be preceded at our evening prayers by a short self-examination over the past day.

Petition: or prayer for our own needs; and—

Intercession: for the needs of others.

I would just add three considerations.

What may we pray for? Prayer must be in Christ's name. If we remember what that means, we may say that any subject of prayer is legitimate, which does not contradict that condition. Some things it is certainly right to pray for; as, the conversion of a sinner,

the spread of Christ's kingdom, my victory over some fault. Some things it is certainly wrong to pray for: as, revenge upon an enemy; or the acquisition of some object which I know would be harmful to myself or to another.

Then there is a large range of subjects, about which I can have no certainty one way or the other: recovery from sickness; fair weather; or some other material advantage. I may pray for these things; but I do so, recognizing that my ignorance may be misleading me, and purposing to welcome whatever answer God's wisdom and love may bestow.

In our petitions and intercessions, we will bear in mind the right order of importance. In the Lord's Prayer we are taught to pray for the acknowledgement of his name, the promotion of his kingdom, the fulfilment of his will, before we ask anything for ourselves; and our petitions for material blessings are for those things only that are really necessary. 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.' 'Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.'

It is well to have a simple scheme under which we frame the subjects of our intercessions arranged for each day of the week: and from time to time (perhaps at our annual

Retreat) to revise and enlarge it, and bring it up to date. As the years pass, our subjects of intercession will be widened, while some may have become obsolete.

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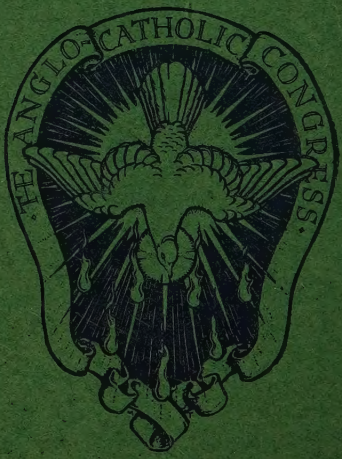

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